



Dammit! We Wasted a Day of Sunlight!

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on August 27, 2008 - 12:07pm

Topic: [Alternative energy](#)

Tags: [solar oven](#), [solar power](#) [[list all tags](#)]

*This is a repost from last summer, when for the first time, I attempted to grow a meaningful amount of my own food, at least enough to store during the winter and supplement (hopefully) fewer trips to the grocery store. I planted 38(!) heirloom tomato plants, which proved to be a **few too many**. I literally had days with bushel baskets of tomatoes. Some went to friends, many were dried, many were partially cooked in a solar oven, then frozen. This brief story is not really about tomatoes or solar ovens, but about a comment my father made, ultimately relating to paradigm shifts and tipping points. (Note: I am just now finishing the last of 2007's tomatoes, just when this years are being snuck off the vine by my dog)*



First some background:

I go out in the morning and pick whatever tomatoes are ripe. On sunny days, I wash and core the tomatoes, then quarter them. In July, I wrote a post [here](#) about the Midwest Renewable Energy Fair, where I bought a Solar SOS oven. I really like it, and use it most days either to cook a snack or blanch/prepare some produce for storage. It can get to about 225 degrees and about 275 if you use the solar reflectors (not shown here)



I then put the tomatoes in the pot, put a little olive oil on them and some oregano and italian seasoning, close the lid of the solar oven, point it towards the sun and rotate clockwise 30 degrees, and leave to do whatever else is on my agenda for the day.



Several hours later (or as little as 2 hours), I return to juicy delicious tomato concoction, which I can eat with bread or such right then.



But lately, I've been dumping the contents in freezer bags and throwing them in my (energy star) freezer, to remind me of summer during the long Wisconsin winter. But heres the moral of this story.

My father is one of my favorite people, though politically and economically he hits it pretty straight down the fairway. He's a peak oil agnostic - though he does believe that oil is finite, he doesn't think there will be meaningful supply problems in his lifetime (on this we disagree). He is a nature lover, and very knowledgeable about the natural world, though I suspect this is related to the deer and ducks he shoots. He has always been a very hard worker - even if nothing really needs 'doing' he will find a 'project' of some sort to occupy his time, usually outdoors.

Though I've thought I've gotten under his skin the past year or so - warning of peak oil, explaining how dependent our system is on liquid fuels, articulating how fragile the food transport economy is, etc., perhaps there have been positive externalities from these talks. He helped me build a decent sized garden this year, and we have been storing (and eating) from the garden for the past few months.

(Punchline) Yesterday I was too busy to go use the solar oven. At about 3 in the afternoon my father returned from some various outdoor chores and inquired 'Whats in the solar oven today, Nat?' I told him I had forgotten to put anything in it - that I was too busy. His reply, (the title of this post), was a vehement **"Dammit?! You've wasted a day of sunlight!!"** And you could tell from his expression that he actually felt this as a 'loss'. (It's possible he was thinking that we'd now need to use the kitchen oven, which would cost money in kWh, as opposed to free sunlight)

After the initial shock and some chuckling, I thought a bit about this. My father is old school. For him to think in terms of 'energy' as a currency to pay attention to, is important. He is not in the peak oil crowd, but just a normal guy pursuing his lot. It gave me renewed confidence in our collective ability to change, when I heard those terms meaningfully spoken, from someone who has worked hard his entire life but never viewed 'sunlight' as something of value.

Today's societal metric of success is pecuniary bigger and better stuff. This metric was not one created overnight. Our world has been morphed by a collection of baby steps, too small to notice day by day, but quite significant when they accumulate over decades. So too, will the world of our children be created by such small steps. The change to a biophysical economy will also be a long process. To me, being chastised by my Dad that I wasted a day of sunlight, was a baby step in the right direction.

I'm not suggesting that everyone be farmers. But to change small aspects of our lives to be more in sync with natural systems is an improvement in our demand infrastructure that will accrete over time. These 'food chores' may appear wasteful to an economist. My time, knowledge and experience in other areas should be able to provide more societal utility translatable to monetary value for me and more resources to society as a whole via my comparative advantage. Indeed, the amount of money I could make in the time it took me to procure one batch of tomatoes would probably be enough to have dried heirloom tomatoes delivered to my door by Federal Express. But I a)enjoy spending my time this way, b)eat healthier unprocessed food, c)have more opportunity to create social capital with neighbors and d)have less opportunity to spend my time consuming other stuff...

Had my Dad not been traveling today, perhaps he would have told me I wasted a day of rain...;)



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